

The Doctrine of 'I'm Blessed'

Pastor Laurie Hartzell's Sermon at First Presbyterian Church, Benton Harbor,
Sunday, Oct. 6, 2019

Matthew 5:1-12 (A reading by several people)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

I first remember hearing the phrase from Naomi Rolling. Mrs. Rolling was a longtime member of First Presbyterian Church. She and her husband, James, lived down on Waukonda Street, just a block or two from where KPEP is now. And besides the fact that she always had peppermints in her pockets for the children in the church, and some of us adults would beg those

peppermints from her, my favorite memory of her was doing the jitterbug at Delcie Southall and Ray Wagner's wedding. But I digress. She was the one I first heard use the phrase. One day I said to her, "Naomi, how are you today?" A big smile came over her face, and she threw her head back a bit. "Oh child"—she often called me that—"Oh child, I'm blessed!"

Now, that isn't the answer I was expecting. I had never heard anyone answer the question "How are you doing?" in that way before. I was expecting her to say, "I'm fine," or "My leg hurts again," or "I'm OK, but I really want to know about you." Because she always wanted to hear about me and my children and not talk about herself. And since that day, I've heard it over and over again in our beloved Benton Harbor.

How are you?

"Oh, I'm blessed," or "I'm blessed and highly favored."

And sometimes I hear it from people I don't expect to hear it from. The checkout lady at Meijer's who is having to deal with cranky people. "How are you?" I say. She says, "I'm blessed!" And I want to say, "Really? I just heard the woman in front of me give you a hard time and be a real jerk to you. You're blessed?"

Or the single mom trying to raise four children on two part-time salaries. She says, "I'm blessed," and I want to say, "Really? You are exhausted most days from trying to make ends meet and keep up with four active little people. You're blessed?"

Or the grandmother who just lost her grandchild. And I want to say, "Really? You've given your life to this child, and I know you are grieving. How can you say, 'I'm blessed?'"

And while every now and then a person will say "I'm blessed" in kind of the automatic and almost flippant way that many of us say "I'm fine" when asked the question, one of things I've learned is that when people say, "I'm blessed" around here, it comes from a deep place most often. It doesn't come from the perfunctory place of "I'm fine."

It comes from a deep place. A place at the ground of their being.

How are you? Ooooh, I'm blessed.

Our text from Matthew's Gospel for today is often called "The Sermon on the Mount." Jesus is being followed by crowds because he is healing people. He is getting popular. His healings making front page news or are trending in "liked" Twitter posts. At one point he gets away from the crowds and takes his disciples up into a mountain to have a heart-to-heart to talk with them about important things.

And he starts with this list of "blesseds." And like my experience with people in Benton Harbor who talk about being blessed, this list is not what we expect.

It's not, you're blessed when your name has become connected with healing and hope and crowds of people are following you to heal them, and you are one of the most popular people in town. Rather, it's you're blessed when people say bad things about you.

It's not, you're blessed when everyone knows you are a spiritual leader and you say wise spiritual things. No, it's, you're blessed when you are poor in spirit. As Pastor Craig Barnes says, Jesus is saying, "You're blessed when you aren't a very good Christian." It's not, you're blessed when you have the power and position to get what you want and make changes in the world. No, it's you're blessed when you are meek.

This is not what we expect, is it? This isn't the path to blessing we expect. To be poor, meek, persecuted. Most of us don't line up for these kinds of things when we think about the "blessed" life. I'm thinking it is not what the disciples expected, either. They probably loved the attention and notoriety Jesus was getting. They were getting popular. They wanted to defeat the Romans, bring a deeper spirituality to the temple, and more. What is this list that Jesus gives about being "blessed"?

Jesus came to bring a different kind of kingdom than the powers of the world understood. It's a kind of kingdom that can't be earned by power or grand spirituality or wealth. It's a kingdom that grows from grace. The kingdom of God is a gift. Pure gift.

Let's think about the word "blessed" for a few minutes. In the Greek, the original language of this text, the word is used as an adjective: makarion. It means "recipient of God's divine favor."

Blessings aren't things we earn. Blessings are only things we can receive. Think of the biggest blessings in your life. Mine, of course, have to do with my husband and children and family and their love. They know me better than anyone—my loveable parts and my not-so-loveable parts. They love me still, even and especially when I don't deserve it. Blessing. I'm never good enough to earn this kind of ongoing love. And the chance to love them back is a blessing, too. It's gift.

So, blessings are gifts of divine favor and we, at best, can receive them. We are blessed when we know that all we have is from God's grace and that, at best, we are receivers, not earners, of love, mercy and life itself.

So, Jesus is telling us here that we are blessed when we realize we can't be good Christians in our own power—but when we are poor in spirit. We are blessed when we have the courage and are honest enough to be real about the losses and sadness in our lives. We are blessed because it is when we are in these states that we really know our need of God and can ground ourselves in the Kingdom of God.

It's like Jesus is saying, the blessed life has to do with being grounded in something different than this world offers. The blessed life has to do with following the path of Christ's kingdom and, most often, the world doesn't get that. And it isn't what we expect—not the path we expect to travel.

As you know, I'm spending these last sermons I preach here at First Presbyterian Church pondering the gifts, the lessons, indeed, the blessings you have given me and that we give each other as we worship and work here. I've been copying a former pastor, Dirk Ficca, in riffing on the title of Robert Fulghum's poem, "Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Most everything I need to know about church and ministry I've learned from and with you here in Benton Harbor at First Presbyterian Church. And one of the things you and our community have planted deep in my soul is this deep sense of being blessed and how it comes from a well that is deeper than any well the world can offer up.

Many people in this community—when they say "I'm blessed" —really know that all they have is a gift from God amid whatever they have going through. A memory seared in my heart happened at Reinald Collins' funeral at Pilgrim Rest a few years ago. Reinald Collins was Angie Lunzy's husband, and he died way too early of ALS. At the funeral, Reinald's mother started

dancing in front of his casket. The dance was a dance of grief and a dance of praise to God all mixed up in one. She was grieving the loss of her son. And she knew she was grounded in God's grace to hold her during the season of deep mourning. And she knew she would see her son again. Her dance will forever be a picture in my mind of "I'm blessed."

I will never, ever glorify poverty in any way. But one thing I've learned over the years from people who live on the margins and struggle to survive each day is that they know something that we people with resources don't get. There is no such thing as a "self-made" person. We cannot even become good Christians through our own efforts. Poor people know that they need God and the compassion of God's people every day. That they are dependent upon a grace that is deeper and more real and more lasting than what the world offers up. It is that need—that dependence—that Jesus says here is the root of blessedness.

I think Jesus was telling his disciples, don't get too hooked on all this glory here, folks. Don't get too hooked on your own strength. He gives them this list of "blesseds" so they don't forget that true and lasting blessing comes not from the glory but from being grounded in grace and mercy.

And, my friends, you here at First Presbyterian have taught me—showed me—and will always be a picture in my heart of a group of Christ followers who know they are blessed.

This week many of us were able to hear Debby Irving, the author of "Waking Up White," speak at the Hilton Garden Inn. Oh, there is so much I could say about that fabulous event that there is not time to cover here. At the end of the talk she showed us a video. The title of the video was "What's your 'Why?'" The question for successful people isn't "What do you do?", but "WHY do you do it?" People who know their WHY know their purpose, and then the "whats" follow naturally. In the video a comedian took a break from his comedy routine and asked a musician in the audience to sing. The singer had a fabulous bass voice and sang a glorious, almost operatic version of "Amazing Grace." Then the comedian asked him to sing it again, but this time to sing it from that place in his life where he is like a person being released from prison after 10 years. He sang it from a totally different place. It was full of emotion and passion, and he made the notes scale up and down. You've heard African Americans do that—sing from that place so deep, with such soul, that it touches the deepest part of your soul. The comedian said the first time the man sang his "what." What did he do the first time? He sang. He used his beautiful voice. But the second time the man sang from his "why." Why did he sing? Because it

was a way to share the depths of his being. It was a reflection of his soul. The point of the video was to invite us to live from our “why.”

People who are blessed know the “why” of the kingdom of God. I believe this congregation is blessed because it knows its “why.” We know that we are here by the grace of God and to proclaim the love of God. We know who we are and whose we are, and that the light of Christ shines in the darkness. We know that our mission is to share the love of Jesus, which is stronger than any barriers the world can muster up. We are rich, poor, black, white, brown, gay, straight, educated, uneducated, young, old, Republican, Democrat and everything in between. The love of Jesus is stronger than anything that divides us. We are here to do justice and be a beacon of justice in the world. We are small, not perfect, often on the margins, but we know our WHY. We are grounded in the same thing those people who say “I’m blessed” are grounded in. Why? Because WE are blessed!

And that grounding, that blessedness, this “why”—as individuals and as a community of faith—make us strong enough, give us hope, and ensures our future. Because our blessing is grounded in our baptism and in the love of Christ that is always smack dab in the middle of our neighborhood—whether we recognize it or not.

Today is World Communion Sunday. This is a day when we remember that this blessing, this grace, this incredible love of God we know in Christ, is not just for us or people who look like us or people in our country. We are connected to people on every inch of this globe. All over this planet today, our brothers and sisters and friends are sharing this meal to remind us that our blessing in this life comes from a source that is deeper and wider than we can imagine. As a community of Christ followers around the world today, we are remembering our “why.”

So, as you come to the table this morning, remember that. Remember that you are part of a blessed community all over the planet. And no matter what you are going through, remember that God’s grace is always for you. Cling tightly to your “why.” Cling tightly to love. You are blessed! And thank you. THANK YOU for teaching me over and over again what that means. I, too, am blessed. Amen.